Training and Technical Assistance Centers
Virginia Department of Education

Linking People and Resources

Autism E-News
Volume 7, Issue 2
October 2008

The Autism Priority Project is excited to bring you this insightful article by Dr. Paula Kluth. Dr. Paula Kluth is a consultant, teacher, author, advocate, and independent scholar who works with teachers and families to provide inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities and to create more responsive and engaging schooling experiences for all learners. Her research and professional interests include differentiating instruction, and supporting students with autism and significant disabilities in inclusive classrooms.

Paula is a former special educator who has served as a classroom teacher, consulting teacher, and inclusion facilitator. She works with teachers in K-12 schools, pre-schools, and early intervention programs. She also regularly works with family organizations and disability-rights and advocacy groups.

She is the author of "You're Going to Love This Kid": Teaching Students with Autism in the Inclusive Classroom ; the lead editor of Access to Academics: Critical Approaches to Inclusive Curriculum, Instruction, and Policy, and the co-author of four upcoming texts: A Land We Can Share: The Literate Lives of Students with Autism; Joyful Learning: Active and Collaborative Structures for the Inclusive Classroom; You're Welcome: 30 Innovative Ideas for Inclusive Schools, and Just Give Him the Whale: 20 Ways to Support & Honor the Interests of Students with Autism.

"Thank You, Bob Barker": Using Passions, Strengths, and Areas of Special Interest to Support Students on the Spectrum

by Paula Kluth

Walker, a middle-school student I know, adores Bob Barker. He loves to watch The Price is Right, play games involving estimation, and often uses a "game show voice" when he speaks. Some teachers in his past have been less than enthusiastic about these quirks. One even gave Walker a red "x" on his behavior chart if he was caught talking "like Bob". When Walker entered fifth grade, however, the teacher understood the interest in Bob Barker as a potential tool for teaching and supporting her student. She brought an inflatable microphone into the classroom so Walker could use it for his oral reports and class presentations, she kept a box of clip-on ties that he could wear on days he felt a bit "off" or down, and even incorporated several Price is Right games into her math instruction. When I asked this savvy educator about her decision to use Walker's interests she was very clear about her rationale:

I use Price is Right because it makes my job easier and really engages Walker. Why wouldn't I use it? When things get particularly tough with him, we can often use Bob to get him back on track. So I don't mind bringing in this obsession at all. In fact, I often think to myself, "Thank you, Bob Barker! What would I do without you?"

Like Walker, many individuals with autism and Asperger's syndrome have deep interest in one or a variety of topics and, like Walker's teacher, many educators are discovering that student fascinations can be bridges to learning, motivation, and support. Unfortunately, special interests are not always valued or seen as potential tools by teachers. Many a meeting has been planned and a behavior program written to squelch a student's "obsessions." In some of these instances, the student may not even be aware that the decision to limit or eliminate the fascination has been made. This individual may, therefore, be confused or distressed when he or she realizes their favorite object or topic has been banned or significantly restricted.

Lianne Holliday Willey (2001), author, parent of a daughter with Asperger's syndrome and an "Aspie" herself cautions that it can be dangerous for people without autism to pass judgment about the passions and "favorites" of others. In fact, she shares, in many circles, having intense interests is considered positive and even admirable:

At the base, I have to wonder, are we so very different from marathon athletes, corporate presidents, bird watchers, or new parents counting every breath their newborn takes? It seems lots of people, NT (neurotypical) or otherwise, have an obsession of sorts. In my mind, that reality rests as a good one, for obsessions, in and out of themselves are not bad habits. There is much good about them. Obsessions take focus and tenacious study. They are the stuff greatness needs. I have to believe the best of the remarkable – the artists, musicians, philosophers, scientists, writers, researchers and athletes-had to

obsess on their chosen fields or they would never had become great (p. 122).

I agree with Holiday Willey and feel strongly that if educators could reframe obsessions as fascinations, passions, interests, or favorites and see them as potential tools, educators and their students may potentially be more satisfied, calm, and successful. Five different ways that teachers can capitalize on a student's "loves" are shared here.

To Develop a Relationship with the Learner

Asking students about their favorite things is a great getting-to-know-you strategy. Since many of our students with autism have fascinations that may be unusual and not shared by many other people –like my former student, Riley, who loves light bulbs-they may be especially appreciative of those who will take some extra time to listen and learn.

To Help Them Shine

Students with autism labels may use their passion or fascination to showcase their. talent and demonstrate to others that they are intelligent. This may be especially important for learners who have been seen or labeled as challenging or difficult. You might help your students create a resume, portfolio, or scrapbook so they can showcase special talents or areas of expertise in a formal way. Or consider planning a classroom-wide "tell us what you know" talent show that focuses on student's areas of expertise. Students can choose to either give a short presentation on areas of special interest or simply stand before the group and field questions from fellow classmates.

To Expand Social Opportunities

Some students who find conversation and common ways of socializing a challenge are amazingly adept when the interaction occurs in relation to an activity or favorite interest. For instance, Patrick, an eighth-grader, had few friendships and seldom spoke to his classmates until a new student came into his English classroom wearing a Star Wars tee-shirt. Patrick's face immediately lit up and he began bombarding the newcomer with questions and trivia about his favorite film. The new student, eager to make a friend, began bringing pieces of his science fiction memorabilia to class. Eventually, the two students struck up a friendship related to their common interest and, with teacher support, formed a lunch club where a few students gathered to play video and board games related to science fiction films (Kluth & Schwarz, 2007).

To Comfort

Teachers who understand the power of student passions as well as those who simply are concerned about making their students lives as stress-free as possible will explore how each learner's fascinations and areas of interest might be used in times of crisis, stress, and difficulty. Too often, we face a student's crisis with warnings and consequences. Instead, we should be providing access to a student's fascinations when times get tough. Not only does this strategy serve to make the student's day more relaxing but it can make the teacher's day more calm and predictable as well! For example, a fourth-grade teacher, aware that her student,

Mary Chris, frequently had difficulty during fire and tornado drills (including screaming and biting herself), used that student's passion to keep her focused and relaxed during these stressful times. When the alarm sounded, the teacher pulled Mary Chris to the front of the line and softly sang "Walking After Midnight" as the class marched to their designated emergency spot. With this sensitive support in place, Mary Chris quietly and quickly walked out of the building beside her teacher (Kluth & Schwarz, 2007). Following this teacher's lead, you might allow a student to spend time with favorite objects or materials during times of distress or difficulty. You might even provide a comfort space somewhere in the school where the learner can go to relax and "visit" favorite materials or activities.

To Interest Them in Standards-Based Content

In addition to tapping into a learner's knowledge base, teachers might also target a student's special skill areas. In a study I conducted with my colleague (Kasa-Hendrickson & Kluth, 2005), a teacher, Ms. Holder, who was planning for Shantel, a child with autism, used one of the young girl's areas of prowess to involve her in social studies curricula: I want her to realize that she is very good at doing some things on her own. So I asked myself, "What is Shantel good at on her own?" Puzzles. She is great at puzzles. I knew another teacher had this magnetic puzzle globe so I asked if I could borrow it. Shantel needs to learn about Europe. It is important for her to have the same academic experiences and I might as well incorporate what she is good at to do it. (p. 9) Not only was Ms. Holder able to find classroom time for Shantel to work on the puzzles she so loved, but she found creative ways to push her student into complex content using a skill that the learner prized. Any teacher can search the curriculum for opportunities to teach about the student's loves. If the student is crazy about vacuum cleaners, this topic can be quite easily featured in a unit on inventions. If the student adores whales, the teacher can discuss them during lessons on habitats or ocean life. And if the student is fascinated with Nancy Drew and mystery novels, this topic can not only be explored during reading or English classes in general, but also when the class studies deduction or problem-solving.

Certainly interests can be limiting and teachers may, at times, need to work with students to reduce time with and attention to fascinations. What has been less of a focus of conversation and planning in schools has been the idea that special interests can also be freeing, calming, motivating, captivating and inspiring. In this article, I hope I have communicated that the fascinations, interests, and areas of expertise that are so often important to students with autism (and other students, as well) should be more valued, honored, and respected and used as a tool to teach, support, and include.

For more information on teaching to student strengths, see the following websites:

Tom Armstrong's Personal Website (multiple intelligences)
http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm
Paula Kluth's Personal Website (inclusive schools) http://www.paulakluth.com/
Positively Autism http://www.positivelyautism.com/

References

Kasa-Hendrickson, C., & Kluth, P. (2005). We have to start with inclusion and work it out as we go: Successful inclusion for non-verbal students with autism. *Journal of Whole Schooling, 2*, 2-14.

Kluth, P. & Schwarz, P. (2007). *Just give him the whale!: 20 Ways to use fascinations, areas of expertise, and strengths to support students with autism*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Willey, L.H. (2001). *Asperger syndrome in the family: Redefining normal*. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.

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